Locator beacons offer hope, more

SAFETY: The personal devices can be lifesavers to outdoor enthusiasts, but they are pricey.

10:48 PM PST on Saturday, January 22, 2005

By RICHARD BROOKS / The Press-Enterprise

Stranded along a frozen river in upstate New York, canoeist Carl Skalak earned a place in search-and-rescue history by becoming the first person in the United States, outside of Alaska, to summon help with a Personal Locator Beacon.

Weather forecasters hadn't predicted the storm that hammered his campsite with rain and snow and kept Skalak tentbound for 2 ½ days in November 2003.

His handheld beacon alerted authorities by sending an electronic SOS to a space satellite. The satellite relayed his location to search coordinators, prompting Skalak's rescue by an Army helicopter crew.

Now, 18 months after the devices became legal for civilian use in all of the states and not just Alaska, they've only been activated twice in California, and both were false alarms, federal records show.

"They would save so many lives if people would take them with them," said Capt. Toby Tyler, who oversees the San Bernardino County sheriff's helicopter crews and search-and-rescue teams. "But they haven't caught on yet."

One reason could be the cost: $500 to $700. The higher-priced beacons broadcast their position to within 100 yards, experts say. Even the less-expensive devices can narrow the search area to within a half-mile.

Illustration: Click to view full-sized graphic

Inland-area Searches

Search teams in San Bernardino and Riverside counties routinely spend hours - even days - combing the mountains for lost or injured hikers with only sketchy information about their locations.

On Nov. 19, for example, searchers spent 9 ½ hours finding and rescuing a 65-year-old hiker who had gone missing along the Pacific Crest Trail in the San Gorgonio Wilderness southeast of Big Bear. The search began after dark. Rescuers knew only that the man probably was somewhere along a 6 ½-mile

stretch.

Two days later, searchers in the same wilderness rescued a 47-year-old Riverside hiker who had disappeared roughly three miles from the 11,500-foot summit of Mount San Gorgonio. The search took 19 hours.

Though marketed primarily to experienced backpackers and mountaineers, and as a backup distress signal for pilots and boaters, the beacons could help a wider variety of people, Tyler said.

Tyler gave the example of someone who gets lost while riding an off-highway vehicle in the desert. "If they don't have food and water available - and it's the heat of the summer - it would be reasonable for them to activate it so we can rescue them before they ... end up dying."

Wintertime, of course, brings increased danger in the mountains.

"As the hours go on, survivability drops, depending on the kind of equipment they've got and any injuries they have," said San Bernardino County Deputy Shannon Kovich, who recalled the case of a snowboarder who spent three days lost on Mt. Baldy and died in a hospital soon after he was rescued. "It was exposure."

Canoeist's Experience

Skalak's rescue is a textbook example of how a cold-weather backcountry trip can turn life-threatening and how the beacons can save lives.

"It was a winter wonderland. It was gorgeous," Skalak recalled of the view from his tent after the overnight snowstorm. "But the river froze, too. And there I was on a canoe trip."

Five days into his trip and nearly out of food, he triggered his beacon. It transmitted a distress signal to an orbiting satellite operated by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Since he was using one of the less-sophisticated units, it did not transmit the exact latitude and longitude of his campsite.

Instead, the satellite sent his general location to the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center in Langley, Va.

Still, an Army helicopter crew found Skalak that same day and flew him to safety.

Rescuers in California have mixed thoughts about the beacons.

"We're all scared of them driving us crazy," said John Dill, a search-and-rescue ranger in Yosemite National Park. "On the flip side, just eliminating one big search could save $200,000."

Other Options

Search teams have never had to track a beacon in California, said Glenn Henderson, of the Hemet-based Riverside Mountain Rescue Unit.

That's partly because of sticker shock, said mountaineer Al Figley, who works at the Sports Chalet in

Rancho Cucamonga, where a top-of-the-line beacon sells for $719.

"People want something that they can use to locate their kid or their wife shopping at Nordstrom's," he said. "If you're going to do real serious backpacking in the Sierras, (a beacon) would be terrific for you. But for the normal public, it's still outside of their price range."

Many potential owners have learned how to get most of the advantages for a fraction of the price.

They routinely monitor their latitude and longitude using a handheld Global Positioning System receiver costing perhaps $200. In an emergency, they can relay their position by cell phone to a 911 operator.

But cell-phone coverage can be spotty, particularly in remote areas. Cold weather can drain cell-phone batteries. And beacons are getting cheaper.

Easy Registration

About 3,500 beacons are registered in the United States, said NOAA Lt. Daniel Karlson. Nearly 400 are in California, second only to Florida with 500.

The system is set up to quickly identify false alarms. By law, an owner must register his or her beacon, which can be done at **www.sarsat.noaa.gov,** a NOAA Web site.

The registration process requires an owner to record his or her name, address and phone number, and the phone numbers of several people who are likely to know the beacon owner's whereabouts.

When a Personal Locator Beacon is activated, its signal includes a 15-digit identifier that corresponds to a specific device. By checking the identifier in a computer database, Air Force rescue coordinators can almost immediately identify the owner and call the registered phone numbers to determine whether the distress signal is apt to be a false alarm.

"Buying the beacon and registering it on the Web site are the only things they've got to do," said Maj. Allan Knox of the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center. "And they've got a very serious lifesaving system (that functions) worldwide."
